"Outwitting the Hun"

By LIEUTENANT PAT O'BRIEN

FROM A PRISON CAMP O'BRIEN WATCHES LAST FIGHT AND FATAL FALL OF HIS CHUM, PAUL RANEY.

Synopsis.—Pat O'Brien, a resident of Momence, Ill., after seeing service in the American flying corps on the Mexican border in 1916, joins the British Royal Flying corps in Canada, and after a brief training period is sent to France. He is assigned to a squadron in active service on the front. He engages in several hot fights with German flyers, from which he emerges victorious. Finally, in a fight with four German flyers, O'Brien is shot down. He falls 8,000 feet and, escaping death by a miracle, awakes to find himself a prisoner in a German hospital, with a bullet hole in his mouth.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

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When my "chummy enemy" first started his conversation with me, the German doctor in charge reprimanded him for talking to me, but he paid no attention to the doctor, showing that some real Americanism had soaked into his system while he had been in the U. S. A. I asked him one day what he thought the German people would do after the war; if he thought they would make Germany a republic, and much to my surprise he said very bitterly, "If I had my way about it, I would make her a republic today and hang the d——d kaiser in the bargain." And yet he was considered an excellent soldier. I concluded, however, that he must have been a German socialist, though he never told me so. On one occasion I asked him for his name, but he said that I would probably never see him again and it didn't matter what his name was. I did not know whether he meant that the Germans would starve me out, or just what was on his mind, for at that time I am sure he did not figure on dying. The first two or three days I was in the hospital I thought surely he would be up and gone long before I was, but blood poisoning set in about that time, and just a few hours before I left for Courtrai he died.

One of those days, while my wound was still very troublesome, I was given an apple; whether it was just to torment me, knowing that I could not eat it, or whether for some other reason, I do not know. But anyway a German flying officer there had several in his pockets and gave me a nice one. Of course there was no chance of my eating it, so when the officer had gone and I discovered this San Francisco fellow looking at it rather longingly, I picked it up, intending to toss it over to him. But he shook his head and said, "If this was San Francisco I would take it, but I cannot take it from you here." I was never able to understand just why he refused the apple, for he was usually sociable and a good fellow to talk to, but apparently he could not forget that I was his enemy. However, that did not stop one of the orderlies from eating the apple.

One practice about the hospital impressed me particularly. That was, if a German soldier did not stand much chance of recovering sufficiently to take his place again in the war, the doctors did not exert themselves to see that he got well. But if a man had a fairly good chance of recovering and they thought he might be of some further use, everything that medical skill could possibly do was done for him. I don't know whether this was done under orders or whether the doctors just followed their own inclinations in such cases.

My teeth had been badly jarred up from the shot, and I hoped that I might have a chance to have them fixed when I reached Courtrai, the prison where I was to be taken. So I asked the doctor if it would be possible for me to have this work done there, but he very curtly told me that, although there were several dentists at Courtrai, they were busy enough fixing the teeth of their own men without bothering about mine. He also added that I would not have to worry about my teeth; that I wouldn't be getting so much food that they would be put out of commission by working overtime. I wanted to tell him that from the way things looked he would not be wearing his out very soon either.

My condition improved during the next two days, and on the fourth day of my captivity I was well enough to write a brief message to my squadron, reporting that I was a prisoner of war and "feeling fine," although, as a matter of fact, I was never so depressed in my life. I realized, however, that if the message reached my comrades it would be relayed to my mother in Momence, Ill., and I did not want to worry her more than was absolutely necessary. It was enough for her to know that I was a prisoner. She did not have to know that I was wounded.

I had hopes that my message would be carried over the lines and dropped by one of the German flying officers. That is a courtesy which is usually practiced on both sides. I recalled how patiently we had waited in our airdrome for news of our men who had failed to return, and I could picture my squadron speculating on my fate.

That is one of the saddest things connected with service in the R. F. C. For days one reads what happens to you, but the constant casualties among your friends are very depressing.

You go out with your "flight" and get into a muss. You get scattered, and when your formation is broken up you finally wing your way home alone.

Perhaps you are the first to land. Soon another machine shows in the sky, then another, and you patiently wait for the rest to appear. Within an hour, perhaps, all have shown up save one, and you begin to speculate and wonder what has happened to him.

Has he lost his way? Has he landed at some other airdrome? Did the Huns get him?

When darkness comes you realize that, at any rate, he won't be back that night, and you hope for a telephone call from him telling of his whereabouts.

If the night passes without sign or word from him, he is reported as missing and then you watch for his casualty to appear in the war office lists.

One day, perhaps a month later, a message is dropped over the line by the German flying corps with a list of pilots captured or killed by the Huns, and then, for the first time, you know definitely why it was your comrade failed to return the day he last went over the line with his squadron.

I was still musing over this melancholy phase of the scout's life when an orderly told me there was a beautiful battle going on in the air, and he volunteered to help me outside the hospital that I might witness it, and I readily accepted his assistance.

That afternoon I saw one of the gamest fights I ever expect to witness.

There were six of our machines against perhaps sixteen Huns. From the type of the British machines I knew that they might possibly be from my own aerodrome. Two of our machines had been apparently picked out by six of the Huns and were bearing the brunt of the fight. The contest seemed to me to be so unequal that victory for our men was hardly to be thought of, and yet at one time they so completely outmaneuvered the Huns that I thought their superior skill might save the day for them, despite the fact that they were so hopelessly outnumbered. One thing I was sure of: they would never give in.

Of course, it would have been a comparatively simple matter for our men, when they saw how things were going against them, to have turned their noses down, landed behind the German lines and given themselves up as prisoners, but that is not the way of the R. F. C.

A battle of this kind seldom lasts many minutes, although every second seems like an hour to those who participate in it, and even onlookers suffer more thrills in the course of the struggle than they would ordinarily experience in a lifetime. It is apparent even to a novice that the loser's fate is death.

Of course, the Germans around the hospital were all watching and rooting for their comrades, but the English, too, had one sympathizer in that group who made no effort to stifle his admiration for the bravery his countrymen were displaying.

The end came suddenly. Four machines crashed to earth almost simultaneously. It was an even break—two of theirs and two of ours. The others apparently returned to their respective lines.

The wound in my mouth made it impossible for me to speak, but by means of a pencil and paper I requested one of the German officers to find out for me who the English officers were who had been shot down.

A little later he returned and handed me a photograph taken from the body of one of the victims. It was a picture of Paul Raney of Toronto, and myself, taken together! Poor Raney! He was the best friend I had and one of the best and gamest men who ever fought in France.

It was he, I learned long after, who, when I was reported missing, had checked over all my belongings and sent them back to England with a signed memorandum—which is now in my possession. Poor fellow, he little realized then that but a day or two later he would be engaged in his last heroic battle with me a helpless onlooker!

The same German officer who brought me the photograph also drew a map for me of the exact spot where Raney was buried in Flanders. I guarded it carefully all through my subsequent adventures and finally turned it over to his father and mother when I visited them in Toronto to [illegible] May

No. 66 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps.

INVENTORY OF KIT

2/Lieut. A.O'Brien, R.F.C. (S.R.) Reported missing 17-8-17

Packed in Trunk.

2	suits Pyjamas.
1	Shirt.
4	Vests.
4	Prs. Pants.
2	Prs. Combinations.
1	Night Shirt.
9	Towels.
1	Pr. Shorts.
1	Pr. Puttees.
2	Prs. Breeches.
1	Pr. Trousers.
1	Strap.
1	Suit civilian clothes.
1	Belt.
1	Tunic.
1	American Tunic.
1	Pr. Ankle Boots.
1	British Warm Coat.
2	Pr. Goggles.
1	Sam Brpwne Belt.
1	Cane.
1	Box Dentrifice.
3	Blankets.

2/Lieut. R.F.C.

Major, Commanding No. 66 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps.

Photograph of Official Memorandum, Giving an Inventory of the Personal Belongings of Lieutenant O'Brien, Which Were Turned Over to Lieutenant Raney When O'Brien Was Reported Missing on August 17, 1917.

form the hardest and saddest duty I have ever been called upon to execute—to confirm to them in person the tidings of poor Paul's death.

The other British pilot who fell was also from my squadron and a man I knew well—Lieutenant Keith of Australia. I had given him a picture of myself only a few hours before I started on my own disastrous flight. He was one of the star pilots of our squadron and had been in many a desperate battle before, but this time the odds were too great for him. He put up a wonderful fight and he gave as much as he took.

The next two days passed without incident and I was then taken to the intelligence department of the German flying corps, which was located about an hour from the hospital. There I was kept two days, during which time they put a thousand and one questions to me. While I was there I turned over to them the message I had written in the hospital and asked them to have one of their flyers drop it on our side of the line.

They asked me where I would like to have it dropped, thinking perhaps I would give my airdrome away, but when I smiled and shook my head, they did not insist upon an answer.

"I'll drop it over ——," declared one of them, naming my airdrome, which revealed to me that their flying corps is as efficient as other branches of the service in the matter of obtaining valuable information.

And right here I want to say that the more I came to know of the enemy, the more keenly I realized what a difficult task we're going to have to lick him. In all my subsequent experiences, the fact that there is a heap of fight left in the Huns still was thoroughly brought home to me. We shall win the war eventually, if we don't slow up too soon, in the mistaken idea that the Huns are ready to lie down.

The flying officers who questioned me were extremely anxious to find out all they could about the part America is going to play in the war, but they evidently came to the conclusion that America hadn't taken me very deeply into her confidence, judging from the information they got, or failed to get, from me.

At any rate, they gave me up as a bad job, and I was ordered to the officers' prison at Courtrai, Belgium.

CHAPTER V.

The Prison Camp at Courtrai.

From the intelligence department I was conveyed to the officers' prison camp at Courtrai in an automobile. It was about an hour's ride. My escort was one of the most famous flyers in the world, barring none. He was later killed in action, but I was told by an English airman who witnessed his last combat, that he fought a game battle and died a hero's death.

The prison, which had evidently been a civil prison of some kind before the war, was located right in the heart of Courtrai. The first building we approached was large and in front of the archway, which formed the main entrance, was a sentry box. Here we were challenged by the sentry, who knocked on the door; the guard turned the key in the lock and I was ushered through [illegible] and directly into a courtyard, on which faced all of the prison buildings, the windows, of course, being heavily barred. After I had given my pedigree—my name, age, address, etc.—I was shown to a cell with bars on the windows overlooking this courtyard. I was promptly told that at night we were to occupy these rooms, but I had already surveyed the surroundings, taken account of the number of guards and the locked door outside, and concluded that my chances of getting away from some other place could be no worse than in that particular cell.

As I had no hat, my helmet being the only thing I had worn over the lines, I was compelled either to go bareheaded or wear the red cap of the Bavarian whom I had shot down on that memorable day. It can be imagined how I looked attired in a British uniform and a bright red cap. Wherever I was taken my outfit aroused considerable curiosity among the Belgians and German soldiers. When I arrived at prison that day I still wore this cap, and as I was taken into the courtyard, my overcoat covering my uniform, all that the British officers, who happened to be sunning themselves in the courtyard, could see was the red cap. They afterwards told me they wondered who the "bug Hun" was with the bandage on his mouth. This cap I managed to keep with me, but was never allowed to wear it on the walks we took. I either went bareheaded or borrowed a cap from some other prisoner.

At certain hours each day the prisoners were allowed to mingle in the courtyard, and on the first occasion of this kind I found that there were 11 officers imprisoned there besides myself.

They had here interpreters who could speak all languages. One of them was a mere boy who had been born in Jersey City, N. J., and had spent all his life in America until the beginning of 1914. Then he moved with his folks to Germany, and when he became of military age the Huns forced him into the army. I think if the truth were known he would much rather have been fighting for America than against her.

I found that most of the prisoners remained at Courtrai only two or three days. From there they were invariably taken to prisons in the interior of Germany.

Whether it was because I was an American or because I was a flyer, I don't know, but this rule was not followed in my case. I remained there two weeks.

During this period Courtrai was constantly bombed by our airmen. Not a single day or night passed without one or more air raids. In the two weeks I was there I counted 21 of them. The town suffered a great deal of damage. Evidently our people were aware that the Germans had a lot of troops concentrated in this town and besides the headquarters staff was stationed there. The kaiser himself visited Courtrai while I was in the prison, I was told by one of the interpreters, but he didn't call on me, and for obvious reasons I couldn't call on him.

The courtyard was not a very popular place during air raids. Several times when our airmen raided that section in the day time I went out and watched the machines and the shrapnel bursting all around; but the Germans did not crowd out there, for their own antiaircraft guns were hammering away to keep our planes as high in the sky as possible, and shells were likely to fall in the prison yard any moment. Of course I watched these battles at my own risk. Many nights from my prison window I watched with peculiar interest the air raids carried on, and it was a wonderful sight with the German searchlights playing on the sky, the "flaming onions" fired high and the burst of the antiaircraft guns, but rather an uncomfortable sensation when I realized that perhaps the very next minute a bomb might be dropped on the building in which I was a prisoner. But perhaps all of this was better than no excitement at all, for prison life soon became very monotonous.

One of the hardest things I had to endure throughout the two weeks I spent there was the sight of the Hun machines flying over Courtrai, knowing that perhaps I never would have another chance to fly, and I used to sit by the hour watching the German machines maneuvering over the prison, as they had an airdrome not far away and every afternoon the students—or I took them for students because their flying was very poor—appeared over the town. One certain Hun seemed to find particular satisfaction in flying right down over the prison nightly, for my special discomfort and benefit, it seemed, as if he knew an airman imprisoned there was vainly longing to try his wings again over their lines. But I used to console myself by saying: "Never mind, old boy, there was never a bird whose wings could not be clipped if they get him just right, and your turn will come some day."

One night there was an exceptionally heavy air raid going on. A number of German officers came into my room, and they all seemed very much frightened. I jokingly remarked that it would be fine if our airmen hit the old prison—the percentage would be very satisfactory—one English officer and about ten German ones. They didn't seem to appreciate the joke, however, and, indeed, they were apparently too much alarmed at what was going on overhead to laugh even at their own jokes. Although these night raids seem to take all the starch out of the Germans while they are going on, the officers were usually as brave as lions the next day and spoke contemptuously of the raid of the night before.

I saw thousands of soldiers in Courtrai, and although they did not impress me as having very good or abundant food, they were fairly well clothed. I do not mean to imply that conditions pointed to an early end of the war. On the contrary, from what I was able to observe on that point, unless the Huns have an absolute crop failure they can, in my opinion, go on for years! The idea of our being able to win the war by starving them out strikes me as ridiculous. This is a war that must be won by fighting, and the sooner we realize that fact the sooner it will be over.

Rising hour in the prison was seven o'clock. Breakfast came at eight. This consisted of a cup of coffee and nothing else. If the prisoner had the foresight to save some bread from the previous day, he had bread for breakfast also, but that never happened in my case. Sometimes we had two cups of coffee, that is, near-coffee.

For lunch they gave us boiled sugar beets or some other vegetable, and once in a while some kind of pickled meat, but that happened very seldom. We also received a third of a loaf of bread—war bread. This war bread was as heavy as a brick, black and sour. It was supposed to last us from noon one day to noon the next. Except for some soup, this was the whole lunch menu.

Dinner came at 5:30 p. m., when we sometimes had a little jam made out of sugar beets, and a preparation called tea, which you had to shake vigorously or it settled in the bottom of the cup, and then about all you had was hot water. This "tea" was a sad blow to the Englishmen. If it hadn't been called tea they wouldn't have felt so badly about it, perhaps, but it was adding insult to injury to call that stuff "tea," which with them is almost a national institution.

Sometimes with this meal they gave us butter instead of jam, and once in a while we had some kind of canned meat.

This comprised the usual run of eatables for the day—I can eat more than that for breakfast! In the days that were to come I learned that I was to fare considerably worse.

We were allowed to send out and buy a few things, but as most of the prisoners were without funds this was but an empty privilege. Once I took advantage of the privilege to send my shoes to a Belgian shoemaker to be half-soled. They charged me 20 marks—$5!

Once in a while a Belgian Ladies' Relief society visited the prison and brought us handkerchiefs, American soap—which sells at about $1.50 a bar in Belgium—toothbrushes and other little articles, all of which were American made, but whether they were supplied by the American relief committee or not I don't know. At any rate, these gifts were mighty useful and were very much appreciated.

One day I offered a button off my uniform to one of these Belgian ladies as a souvenir, but a German guard saw me and I was never allowed to go near the visitors afterwards.

The sanitary conditions in this prison camp were excellent as a general proposition. One night, however, I discovered that I had been captured by "cooties."

This was a novel experience to me and one that I would have been very willing to have missed, because in the flying corps our airdromes are a number of miles back of the lines and we have good billets and our acquaintance with such things as "cooties" and other unwelcome visitors is very limited.

When I discovered my condition, I made a holler and roused the guard, and right then I got another example of German efficiency.

This guard seemed to be even more perturbed about my complaint than I myself, evidently fearing that he would be blamed for my condition.

The commandant was summoned and I could see that he was very angry. Someone undoubtedly got a severe reprimand for it.

I was taken out of my cell by a guard with a rifle and conducted about a quarter of a mile from the prison to an old factory building which had been converted into an elaborate fumigating plant. There I was given a pickle bath in some kind of solution, and while I was absorbing it my clothes, bed clothes and whatever else had been in my cell was being put through another fumigating process.

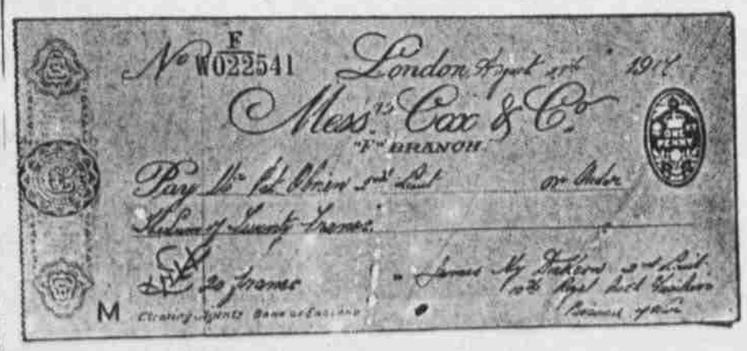
While I was waiting for my things to dry—it took perhaps half an hour—I had a chance to observe about one hundred other victims of "cooties"—German soldiers who had become infested in the trenches. We were all nude, of course, but apparently it was not difficult for them to recognize me as a foreigner even without my uniform on, for none of them made any attempt to talk to me, although they were very busy talking about me. I could not understand what they were saying, but I knew I was the butt of most of their jokes and they made no effort to conceal the fact that I was the subject of conversation.

When I got back to my cell I found that it had been thoroughly fumigated, and from that time on I had no further trouble with "cooties" or other visitors of the same kind.

As we were not allowed to write anything but prison cards, writing was out of the question; and as we had no reading matter to speak of, reading was nil. We had nothing to do to pass away the time, so consequently cards became our only diversion, for we did, fortunately, have some of these.

There wasn't very much money as a rule in circulation, and I think for once in my life I held most of that, not due to any particular ability on my part in the game, but I happened to have several hundred francs in my pockets when shot down. But we held a lottery that was watched without quite such intense interest as that. The drawing was always held the day before to learn who was the lucky man. There was as much speculation as to who would win the prize as if it had been the finest treasure in the world. The great prize was one-third of a loaf of bread. Through some arrangement, which I never quite figured out, it happened that among the eight or ten officers who were there with me, there was always one-third of a loaf of bread over. There was just one way of getting that bread, and that was to draw lots. Consequently that was what started the lottery. I believe if a man had ever been inclined to cheat he would have been sorely tempted in this instance, but the game was played absolutely square, and if a man had been caught cheating the chances are that he would have been shunned by the rest of the officers as long as he was in prison. I was fortunate enough to win the prize twice.

As he was traveling with other prisoners toward a prison camp in the heart of Germany, O'Brien conceived the idea of leaping through the car window in a desperate attempt to gain his liberty. There was one chance in a thousand that he would escape death or recapture. O'Brien took the chance. Read about this thrilling exploit in the next installment.



Facsimile of the Check Given to Lieutenant O'Brien as a Joke by Lieutenant Dickson When They Were Fellow Prisoners at Courtrai.

(TO BE CONTINUED)